BE IMMOVABLE
I Corinthians 15:51-58
April 3, 1983 (Easter)

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

One of the bittersweet blessings of television is that private grief and personal tragedy are brought into our living rooms. Presbyterian journalist Hugh T. Kerr watched, as we all did, and wrote: "Watching the distraught and strained figure of Prince Ranier...standing quietly and faithfully beside Princess Grace's casket, listening or not listening to the words of Biblical faith, one must surely say this of the religious service, that here, after all, is what religion is about. It provides the word of hope when everything else keeps silence." (Theology Today, January 1983)

It may be other places as well: in the establishment of a common morality, for instance; in rites and rituals by which our common life is organized; or in the visionary adovcacy of a better world for all people. Religion is in these places as well. But it is fundamentally at the place where life and death converge. "You can tell who the Christians are" Horace Allen, a witty Presbyterian says. "They're the ones who sing at their funerals...They are the strange people who think the resurrection of Jesus Christ has something to do with the daily newspaper."

There is very little the preacher can say that will make you believe that the resurrection happened if you don't believe it. Oh, we can - and have - spun out the possibilities. Week in and week out, we bring our theological peculiarities into confrontation with the scientific realities of the world in which we live. We are learning that what we thought was pinned down definitively is not nearly as certain as we once assumed. We are learning that the human mind is not the ultimate judge of truth and possibility, that because we don't understand it does not mean that it cannot be true. We have allowed for the Holy to break into the human. We have, on occasion, actually been able to point to it. But we are not much convinced by argument this day. As a matter of fact we do understand that the harder we argue the more illusive the point becomes. We do understand that there is something about this that is lost, the more intensely we handle it and the more carefully we scrutinize it.

John Updike, in a poem "Seven Stanzas for Easter", expressed it for those who must preach and listen to Easter sermons:

"Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
Making of the event a parable, a sign
Painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages..."

We are not persuaded by much arguing. We seem to know that the evidence here lies some place other than in books and scholarly tomes. We are stopped in our tracks, however, by heroism in life which fairly shouts that life is Lord of death, and love is stronger than anything.

"A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ," he wrote. "I died to the law that I might live to God," he claimed. "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me," is the way he tried to explain what a person does who no longer practices religion as a set of rules.

Something very important about our humanity, and about Christian relevance, emerges from Paul's insight here. A religion based on grace is freeing, life-giving, nurturing, inclusive, loving. A religion based on keeping a set of rules, however admirable, becomes an end in itself, a demarcation line between the good people who keep the rules and the bad people who either don't know what the rules are or who chose to ignore them. A religion of rules is a never-ending process of trying harder and harder to live up to someone else's expectations, one's parents, the religious authorities, or God, and the only guaranteed product of that kind of religion is guilt. Who, after all, can ever do enough good, and obey enough rules to guarantee that God will be pleased.

Matters of love and freedom and guilt are very near the heart of our humanity. "Amazing Grace. How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." got itself a position in the charts and became a piece of America, not because it is good music, but precisely because it's relevant theology. People who wouldn't be caught dead going to church and reciting creeds, nevertheless know exactly what it means.

Time Magazine ran a feature article several weeks ago on British actor Dudley Moore. Moore is 5'2" with a minor physical defect and a sky-rocketing career. Time reports, however, that he "spent seventeen years in the offices of one shrink or another trying to come to terms with his childhood." He says: "Psychologically it was made more harrowing by the fact that my parents felt guilty about it. That made me feel as if I had done something wrong...I'm not grim, but I'm still basically cringing." I read in that a little more than superficial Hollywood psychology. I read, rather, a strikingly human expression of the incredible human vulnerability to guilt and power of guilt to shape and influence human beings all their lives.

The importance of what Paul wrote to the Galatians is the insight that religion sometimes exploits that vulnerability and actually traffics in guilt. My first exposure to the subject came in a class taught by a distinguished Chicago Psychiatrist. "You Christians play psychological blackmail with people" he told a startled group of theological students. "First, you tell them they are sinners by nature; unacceptable to God, to other good people and, obviously to themselves if they think about it much. You tell them they were born that way. and when you've got them feeling sufficiently guilty you offer yourselves and your churches as the only way to relieve a little of that guilt."

He didn't have it quite right, of course. But I certainly never forgot what he said. A lot of Christianity does exploit the inherent power of guilt. A lot of religion is manipulative and demeaning and guilt-producing. A lot of religion deserves what the psychiatrist said about it.

The point even here is not philosophic, it is behavioral. It surely is not physiological. It has to do, not with what people believe, but how they are living their lives.

The philosophical question has haunted humankind from the very beginning. "Why must we die?" Why must our humanity disentegrate in front of our eyes? Why this double insult of mortality and awareness of mortality? Like everything else in creation, we die. Alone in creation we know about it. The Greeks struggled with it, and it has been the human dilemma ever since. Immanuel Kant's "Third Great Philosophical Question" is **What May I Hope For?** Human philosophy's greatest struggle is to come out any place other than a grim pessimism of emptiness and despair, the only good possible in the form of bravery in the face of death. It spills over into the literature of the race. From Shakespeare's "Out, out brief candle..." to Emily Dickinson's enfatuation with death and dying, the poets have told us, embarrassingly, what we've been quietly thinking about all these years. Sometimes they have said it with elegance. Thus Edna St. Vincent Milay on death - "I do not approve." And sometimes they have gathered up our anger with great beauty. Thus Dylan Thomas, at the death of his father: "Do not go gently into the night. Rage, rage, against the dimming of the light."

Now a curious thing begins to happen - at least to some of us, the more we think about it. Slowly, but surely we come to see that our mortality is not the issue, ultimately. Slowly, the accumulated years teach us a very lovely lesson and it is that without mortality, without death, all the beauty and nobility would go out of our humanity. It is a secret the Greeks understood and we are inclined to forget. Immortals cannot be noble. In fact, they can't love. The Greek gods are trivial because they don't die. So, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the faith which resulted from it has, with regularity been trivialized. Somehow this most stunning thing, which St. Paul saw was for all people - all God's creation, whether they believed it or not - somehow well intending folk have taken that precious reality and trivialized it, parochialized, forced it into a self serving support system. "Believe it or burn eternally" they somehow continue to say. On the other hand God's incredible gift of eternal life, someone cracked recently, always comes out sounding like "an uninterrupted gala of wining and dining, of winters in the Bahamas and summers on the Riviera, of disco dancing in golden slippers and Super Bowls on the heavenly turf, of playing ball with Babe Ruth or making love to Mairlyn Monroe..." (The American Scholar, the Case for Mortality, Leon R. Kass, Spring 1983, p. 187)

We learn, in time, God's wisdom expressed in our own mortality. We also learn that mortality is not the point: that the point is a yearning in our souls which nothing in this life can satisfy; a spiritual reach which exceeds our grasp; a thirst for something beyond, some sense that what we are, now, in this life, matters, counts for something; that, in St. Paul's words our work is not in vain. That's really it, isn't it? - that our work, our labor, our creativity, our love, our dreams simply do not disappear, evaporate; that our dearest and deepest loves have something more than our mortality in them. We need that in order to live, in order to sing and laugh and rejoice.

Christianity suggests to each of us that the pain we experience from guilt is answered by a God who loves us and accepts us and forgives us. We have trouble with that most of the time. Mostly we are more comfortable with a religion based on fair value. "We don't like hearing that we are saved by grace." Karl Barth wrote. "We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone." (Deliverance to the Captives, p. 40) And so we have trouble accepting and receiving what we need most. And there is a very real sense that the more intense our need for grace, the more difficulty we have with it. And there is a sense in which all the theological rhetoric in the world probably isn't going to convince us that God loves us if we feel unloved, unlovable, and guilty.

And so, let's come at it from the human perspective. At our best, we know that guilt is not healthy as a permanent condition, that people can be manipulated and made to do what they don't particularly want to do by exploitation of guilt. We know, however, that if guilt is the motive there will be no integrity and no authenticity and no joy to it, whatever it is, from preparing meals to going to church.

In fact we do learn that people are motivated more by positive reinforcement, by confidence and compliment and affection. Even though we still do it on occasion, we know that a child isn't motivated to be smarter by calling him stupid: nor will he be trustworthy for having been called a liar; nor will he work hard as a result of being called lazy. In marriage, faithfulness is not particularly enhanced by the fear of what will happen if you get caught being unfaithful, but by a love given to you which is so precious it would break your own heart to betray it.

So it is that Christianity begins with the love of God. Love for neighbor, justice and kindness and generosity occur in life not out of fear or guilt - but out of the acknowledgment of God's love. Even confession occurs for the Christian not out of guilt primarily, certainly not out of a sense that something terrible is going to happen if we don't confess, but ultimately because we know we are loved.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the unlikely good news that the God who knows our past, loves us in spite of it. It is the improbable but liberating news that God knows all there is to know about us now - and loves us still. The freedom comes in when we shift to future tense. He is going to continue loving us whatever is ahead, whatever we chose to do in the future.

Karl Barth, capable of the most complex philosophic argument, said this simply and well..."Grace is the beginning of the true life of freedom, of a carefree heart, of joy deep within, of love of God and neighbor, of great and assurred hope." (op. cit., p. 40)

The Good News - the best of all news - is that the first and the last word about it is a word of love: God's love: truly a grace that is amazing! Amen.

tionship so painful it feels like death and there is a temptation not to love again. For some it is the quiet humiliation of aging, the loss of strength and stamina which feels like the loss of significance and meaning. For some of us it is the inclination to stop caring about marriage, or the economy, or the nuclear arms race, or justice in the Third World, or the quality of government in city hall. For some it is the inclination to give in to the sickness we battle daily, to cease the fight, to give ourselves to death instead of life.

However dramatic or modest, we have our struggle, each of us. And we, among all of humanity, need - for the sake of life - God's gift of resurrection. We actually believe what happened on Easter morning has something to do with the daily newspaper.

"Don't budge," Paul said. Stay with it. Be strong. Your struggle is worth it. An ultimate victory has been won. Your life counts. You are worth something ultimate and eternal. "Be steadfast," he wrote, "immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Now unto the King of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.